



STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS

★★★★★

RELEASED: Now Showing
DIRECTOR: J.J. Abrams
CAST: Daisy Ridley, John Boyega,
 Harrison Ford
RATING: M

CINEMA

The Force is strong in this one.

It's kind of ironic that a different director can deliver a new Star Wars film that fits more seamlessly into the franchise's established universe than the ones helmed by its creator, George Lucas. Irvin Kershner did it with *The Empire Strikes Back* and now J.J. Abrams has delivered the first truly worthy successor to the original trilogy. Ok, so *The Force Awakens* isn't as good as *Empire*, but it's a better Star Wars film than *Return of the Jedi*.

Abrams is a longtime fan who understands what made Episodes IV–VI work, and he gives the old school fans what they want while introducing the galaxy far, far away to the next generation through a trio of thoroughly endearing new characters – Daisy Ridley's Ren, John Boyega's Finn, Oscar Isaac's Poe – and ball droid BB-8, who's as instantly loveable as R2 was when we first met him. These newcomers serve as the entry point into the new trilogy, while the old guard (Han, Chewie, Leia et al) are on hand to pass the baton, or in this case the lightsaber.

Moreover, *The Force Awakens* is not just a continuation of events post-*Jedi*, it's a cunningly disguised remake/reboot of *A New Hope*. By setting the new story within a familiar template, *The Force Awakens* is able to satisfy fans and prove accessible to those who've never seen a Star Wars film (shame on them!).

There's a cute droid carrying vital information who's stranded on a desert

planet and hunted by an evil regime. The First Order have filled the void left after the fall of the Empire and they're every bit as ruthless, and packing the kind of hardware, starships and fighters that makes merchandise collectors drool with fetishistic delight. Although villain Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) and his Supreme Leader (Andy Serkis) will never achieve the iconic status of Darth Vader and the Emperor, they're sufficiently sinister enough to pose a dire threat to the heroes, not to mention armed with a planet-destroying superweapon that makes the Death Star look like a golf ball.

Abrams' decision to shoot on film using real sets, real locations, models and prosthetics also guarantees an authentic feel that's pure Star Wars, unlike the crowded and cartoonish CGI vistas conjured by Lucas in the prequels. Even the peripheral creatures and characters are given room to register.

No movie could possibly live up to the hype and fervent expectation that has surrounded *The Force Awakens*, but diehard Star Wars fans are unlikely to emerge disappointed. There's enough unanswered questions to set up the next film (The First Order Strikes Back?) and any anxiety that Disney is a bad fit for Star Wars has been dispelled – there's not an Ewok or Gungan in sight. **Scott Hocking**

FURTHER VIEWING: *The Empire Strikes Back*

